



The Laird Letter



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WELCOME

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the first issue of my Assembly e-newsletter. This newsletter is born from the need to communicate regularly about the ever-changing developments in state public policy.

Since the legislative session ended on September 12, I have been moving throughout the Assembly District meeting with a wide range of groups. As I walk into these events, the most common greeting is: "What a time you picked to go to Sacramento!" followed by "I sure wouldn't want your job!" It is true that when I decided to seek an Assembly seat almost three years ago, the state had a \$8 billion budget surplus; the energy crisis was a few weeks from hitting California; and it was unquestioned wisdom that whomever won the Governor's election in 2002 would serve a full four year term.

I have found that one of my greatest first-year challenges has been to keep my constituents abreast of developments on major issues during one of the fastest moving political environments in modern times. I hope this newsletter will meet that challenge in a way that makes you feel you are part of the action.

I intend to publish the newsletter bi-monthly, with more frequent updates as circumstances dictate. Your feedback on format and content would be much appreciated.

John Laird

Assemblymember, 27th District

Impressions of 2003

I came to Sacramento with a goal to hit the ground running, and I succeeded. I kept Assemblymember Fred Keeley's staff members aboard, went through an intensive ten day training course with other new legislators, set up three legislative offices, and was one of five first-term members to be named chair of a standing committee – one of the three environmental policy committees – the Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee. I was also named chair of the Select Committee on California Water Needs and Climate Change – a committee that was established to investigate the impacts of climate change on California's water needs, and to make recommendations to the Assembly. Finally, in response to the state's budget crisis, I was appointed to Chair the Assembly Special Committee on State Mandates, a bipartisan committee that was assembled to systematically review the state mandate law, and closely assess what the State requires of local governments and school districts, and the subsequent reimbursement process.

I landed six good committee assignments, including committees with jurisdiction over coastal issues and civil rights. Shortly after taking office, I introduced a number of bills on issues ranging from water planning to open space preservation, tolerance training to protecting working families, and initiative reform to local health benefits. I was pleased that thirteen of them made their way through the legislature and twelve were signed into law. (For more on bills see the article "2003 Legislation: An Interview with John" below or go to the [Session Bill List](#))

I was frustrated by the state's budget process. My staff and I prepared a detailed background sheet to explain the state's fiscal situation in an understandable way and distributed it widely. I participated in the Assembly bipartisan budget group in the hopes we could work toward a solution without a budget standoff. And I was locked into the Assembly chambers with my colleagues for almost thirty hours – a new record – in late July when a final agreement was hammered out. I worked diligently to secure some of the successes in this budget, including the preservation of the AIDS Drug Assistance Program funding and the largely bipartisan recommendations of the Special Committee on Mandates, which will be included in legislation in 2004, and are expected to save the State between \$10 and \$20 million per year.

"I came to Sacramento with a goal to hit the ground running, and I succeeded." – John Laird

This next year will present even more complicated challenges. How does the legislature work with the new Governor? How do elected officials meet the public's desire for change? How do we bridge the remaining budget deficit? How do I work to meet the concerns of the 27th District – which didn't vote for the recall – in a climate where the public is tired of gridlock? There will be no easy answers, but I am ready to continue the hard work.

I am honored to represent you in the State Assembly. Despite these tough times, I enjoy coming to work every day, and trying to make the system work for the people and needs of California's Central Coast. I hope you will continue to give me feedback on what concerns you – and I hope this newsletter will be a successful part in addressing those concerns.

2003 LEGISLATION: **AN INTERVIEW WITH** **JOHN**



Rachel Pearman is a 2002 graduate of Pacific Grove High School, Government major at California State University, Sacramento, and intern in Assemblymember Laird's Sacramento Office. Rachel is also the editor of the Laird Letter. The following piece features questions and answers highlighting several of Assemblymember Laird's bills that were recently signed into law.

Rachel: Assemblymember Laird, you have now had a little time since the Session ended and the Governor completed his work on bills, how would you evaluate your first year?

Laird: I was quite pleased with my first year legislative accomplishments. I'm proud to report that every bill that I presented in committee and was put up for a vote passed. In all, the Legislature passed 13 of my bills and the Governor signed 12 of those bills. Strategic decisions were made to hold a number of bills in committee, on the Assembly Floor, or Senate Floor.

Rachel: I know from my own experience in your district that environmental issues are often at the forefront

Laird: Environmental issues have always been a passion for me. My college thesis was on water policy, and I have long been involved in local environmental organizations. Therefore, I knew that one of my primary legislative pursuits would be environmental policy. Over half of the measures I introduced this year were environmental policy measures.

AB 1700 is one of my bills that I was particularly pleased to see signed into law. This bill, will fund the cleanup of contaminated federal sites. California, like other states with contaminated federal lands such as closed military bases, has opportunities to utilize federal funding to pay for staff to review and oversee cleanup of contaminated federal facilities and to hasten the return of such facilities to productive and revenue generating uses. Unfortunately, the State's hiring freeze would have resulted in the elimination of many federally funded state positions and thereby slowed or postponed cleanups. For sites such as Fort Ord, postponement could translate into the loss of significant opportunities to protect the public's health and safety, as well as the revitalization of the community and enhanced housing and employment opportunities. AB 1700 will allow the State to utilize federal funding to hire or transfer skilled state employees to oversee the cleanup and return of Fort Ord and other contaminated sites to productive use at no state General Fund cost.

On behalf of the members of the Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee, I authored AB 1702 to enhance California's Underground Storage Tank (UST) standards. Existing state and federal laws set standards for system design, construction and installation, upgrading of existing systems, general operating requirements, release detection, and corrective actions relating to USTs. AB 1702 strengthened provisions and brought state law in line with federal law. The bill also assures that the State Water Resources Control Board is authorized to require reporting, assessment and cleanup whenever a release is detected and that both the UST's owner and operator are responsible for making sure that the UST system is installed, operated and managed in accordance with applicable laws.

Additionally, as Chair of the Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee and as a member of the Natural Resources Committee, I was also able to help shape a number of measures that passed the committees and were signed into law.

Rachel: While environmental issues are certainly on the forefront in the 27th District, you also have constituents engaged in farming and ranching. How do you balance these competing interests?

Laird: I don't believe that environmental and agricultural goals are necessarily in conflict. The Central Coast has some of the most productive farmland and recognizable natural resources in the world. At the state level, I have the dual goal of protecting California's millions of acres of open space, as well as helping California's farmers and ranchers continue to feed the world. Decades ago, the State established the Williamson Act as a program to protect agricultural land from urban development. Under the Act, farmers and ranchers are able to lower their property taxes if they agree to keep their land in farming, ranching,

or open space for ten years. However, under the State Constitution, Williamson Act property tax reductions are only viable if the agreements are enforceable. Unfortunately, there have been recent instances where Williamson Act contracts were violated and the penalties for violation determined to be too low to serve as an effective deterrent. In Tracy, a department store was built on Williamson Act land; in Delano, an urban subdivision was built on Williamson Act land; and in Tuolumne County, Williamson Act land was converted into ranchettes.

If the Williamson Act were to be invalidated, farmers and ranchers would have to pay significantly higher property taxes. Some would go out of production and many, especially small farmers who have higher costs, would be under great financial pressure to develop their land. Accordingly, I authored AB 1492 to increase the penalty for constructing a residential, commercial, or industrial building in excess of 2,500 square feet on land subject to Williamson Act contracts. These higher breach penalties will deter contract violations, protect the legal basis for the Williamson Act, thereby protecting farmers, ranchers, and open space.

Rachel: I have heard you mention before that one of your legislative priorities is social justice. What were you able to accomplish in the area of social justice?

Laird: Social justice issues are a priority for me. Through both my own legislation, legislation I jointly or co-authored, and bills that passed the Assembly Judiciary Committee of which I am an active member, a number of significant changes were made. (See below for discussion of joint author) California has the most diverse student population in the country. With diversity and unfamiliarity, misunderstandings and ignorance may occur, which can lead to acts of intolerance, hatred, and even violence. Unfortunately, statistics from the California Department of Education verify that such actions continue to pervade our schools. At present, the State funds the Instructional Time and Staff Development Program. This program provides reimbursements for training in subject-matter knowledge, teaching strategies, classroom management, conflict resolution, and other topics to improve pupil performance in the core curriculum areas. I authored AB 1250 to add hatred and intolerance prevention as a category of training eligible for reimbursement under the program.

Rachel: Prior to serving in the Legislature, you were employed by the County of Santa Cruz and even helped to develop some of the County's legislative priorities. Is it true that you successfully authored a local government-related health benefits proposal that you developed while with the County?

Laird: Yes, and because I was so familiar with the issue and had worked in the field, I particularly enjoyed presenting the bill and answering any questions that arose. Under current law, California Public Employees'

Retirement System (CalPERS) only recognizes the State definition of domestic partners – adult same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples where one of the partners is over the age of 62. Some local agencies, including the County of Santa Cruz, the City of Santa Cruz, and the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District, previously adopted broader definitions to include both same and opposite-sex couples without the over age 62 requirement. The State's coverage of some but not all domestic partners certainly provided partial financial relief, however, covering a relatively small number of domestic partners outside the coverage for employees has proved to be a significant administrative burden and expense for local agencies. Compounding the problem, in recent years CalPERS has successfully advocated limiting alternative health plans, placing participating local agencies in the position of choosing between CalPERS coverage and their long-standing domestic partner policies. I authored AB 1082 to end this dilemma by permitting CalPERS to recognize a local agency's definition of domestic partners that was in effect prior to the date that such agencies were allowed to offer health care benefits through the CalPERS program to their employees' domestic partners. This is a fiscally responsible change for both the State and local entities.

Rachel: Another of your priorities has been helping working families. This is always a significant issue before the

As the chair of the
Environmental Safety
and Toxic Materials
Committee the
Assemblymember
conducts a meeting



Legislature and numerous advances have been made in recent years. Did you engage in this issue area in 2003?

Laird: In recent years, California has been a leading state in preserving working families, protecting workers on the job, and enhancing worker rights. This year was no different, and many of these measures passed through the Assembly Labor & Employment Committee or the Assembly Public Employees, Retirement and Social Security Committee, both of which I am member. Additionally, I personally authored two such measures this year. First, I authored AB 1418 to ensure that workers employed on public works projects are paid in a timely and accurate manner. Recognizing that existing law failed to provide an adequate deterrent, the bill established graduated minimum penalties for wage violations, unless the failure to pay was a good faith mistake, as well as requiring that interest accrues on past due wages.

Rachel: Earlier you mentioned that you were the joint author of bills. What does it mean to be a joint author and what were those bills?

Laird: Typically, the author of a bill is solely responsible for the contents of that measure and his or her staff does much of the background work. While there are various ways to impact the course of a bill, in some instances an Assemblymember asks a colleague to join as a "joint author." In such an

instance, there is more shared responsibility and work at both the Assemblymember and staff levels.

This year I was pleased to jointly author three bills that were signed by the Governor. First, I jointly authored AB 205, the most significant civil rights measure of the year. AB 205, introduced by Assemblymember Jackie Goldberg (Los Angeles) significantly expands the rights and responsibilities currently provided to domestic partners registered with the Secretary of State. These include almost all the legal rights and responsibilities under state law currently available only to married couples, and guide couples through almost every complex legal situation faced by families such as death, divorce, custody disputes, illness, childbirth and adoption.

I also joined with Assemblymembers Joe Simitian (Palo Alto) and George Nakano (Torrance) on two bills to address cruise ship discharge. The discharge of waste, treated or not, may have significant environmental impacts on California's coastal water quality and the diverse ecosystem of our coast. As many people are aware, there was an incident with a cruise ship just outside of Monterey discharging wastewater. AB 121 and AB 906 prohibit discharge of sewage sludge, oily bilge water, hazardous waste, and other waste into state waters and national marine sanctuaries along the state's coast. I was pleased to work closely with my colleagues on these measures and see these bills signed into law.

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To help better serve you please send an email with remarks about this newsletter. You may also send comments about legislation, or events in the district to appear in future editions. For comments to include in the Newsletter please be brief because space is limited.

Thank you for your interest, and comments.

EMAIL

DISTRICT NEWS & EVENTS



Left: Duplexes at the newly opened Murphy Ranch in Morgan Hill
Below: John at the Murphy Ranch Ribbon cutting on October 3

Murphy Ranch



This development provides 100 affordable family townhouses on nearly 7.2 acres. The site is located within a two-block walk of the Caltrans Station, a day care center and a major shopping area. The project incorporates two children's tot-lots, a solar heated swimming pool and a Community Building. The Community Building includes a lounge, Computer-Study Lab, Management Leasing Offices and restrooms with direct access from the swimming pool area. Murphy Ranch was developed by the non-profit organization First Community Housing. For more information visit their website at firsthousing.com



In the past six months Assemblymember Laird has been the MC at many community events ranging from the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau's Annual Dinner to the Defense De Mujeres/Women's Crisis Support Annual Dinner.

In the past three months the Assemblymember has spoken to over 100 groups including the Monterey Institute of International Studies on October 29, Monterey Bay Central Labor Council in October. John currently has plans to attend several events in Monterey through the month of December including, speaking to politics classes at CSUMB on the 15th, and the Watsonville Rotary Club December 17.